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REVERENCE FOR NATURE OR THE IRRELEVANCE OF NATURE? ADVAITA VEDANTA AND ECOLOGICAL CONCERN

Introduction

In this paper I wish to offer some limited reflections on the relation between Advaita Vedānta and ecology. At the outset, I want to say that I have the utmost esteem for the Advaita tradition and its exponents, both past and present. Nevertheless, there are aspects of Advaitic spirituality that give me pause for thought, especially in light of the ecological distress that now affects India as much as it does the rest of the world. The most significant of these is Advaita's radical devaluation of natural universe.

Since the publication of Lynn White's article "The Religious Roots of our Ecological Crisis"¹ in 1967, the idea that there is a relationship between religious beliefs and attitudes toward the environment has become commonly accepted. White's article exposes presuppositions of the Judeo-Christian—especially the Christian—tradition that the author believes have caused the West to be environmentally insensitive. In particular, he notes the ideas of the absolute transcendence of God and the ascendance, in God's image, of humanity. In response to this article, there have, of course, been efforts both to defend and to rethink the Christian stance toward the natural world. There have, in addition, been attempts to extol the ecological potential of certain elements of "Eastern thought." These include images of ultimate reality, humanity, and nature that are said to foster a more environmentally sensitive outlook. Finally, there have been efforts to show that, no matter what the ethic, in actual

1: *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207.

practice all civilizations have been motivated by expediency in their approach to the natural world.²

My concern here is with the second of these movements. We may doubt whether or not religious ideas have actually influenced environmental practice, or to what extent. But there can be no doubt that the philosophical-religious systems of South and East Asia contain important strands that appear to avoid the pitfalls White sees in the Judeo-Christian tradition. There are ways of thinking in the East that seem to have great potential for inspiring environmental sensitivity. In this connection, two traditions are most frequently mentioned. One is Taoism, with its earthy naturalism, its ideal of non-interference, and its profound sense that humanity is but a part of the natural universe. The other, my focus in this paper, is the Vedānta tradition of Hinduism with its unitive vision that "All this [world], verily, is *Brahman* (the Absolute)" (*ChU* 3. 14. 1).

My contention is that, if by Vedānta we mean the dominant Advaita (nondualist) school, founded by Śaṅkara, its potential contribution to environmental ethics has been vastly over-estimated. No doubt, Advaita represents a profound spirituality. In positive relation to the interests of ecology, it fosters values such as simplicity of life, frugality, and – for the ascetic at least – non-violence. But Advaita also encourages attitudes of devaluation and neglect of the natural universe. While not, of course, directly responsible for environmental degradation, such attitudes carry the potential to seriously undermine environmental concern.

As Lanoy and others have pointed out, it is the *śamnyāsins*, the Brahmanical renouncers, who have had the highest social status in India and "who have been the main culture bearers . . . since very ancient times."³ It is the renouncers who have been, especially, the creators of Hindu spirituality and the teachers of the Hindu masses. Among these *śamnyāsins*, the Śaṅkara tradition – which preserves and propagates Advaita – has been dominant, both in numbers and prestige, for more than 1,000 years. It goes without saying that its influence on the Hindu outlook has been profound and all-pervasive. What Advaita has to say

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2. See J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames, *Nature In Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), xiii-xxi, 279-289.
3. Richard Lanoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 210.

about nature, therefore, has been and continues to be important. To be sure, Advaita has long been known for its ascetic denial of the world in favour of spirit. Nevertheless, there is a need to look again at this aspect of the tradition in light of a certain naivete about it in the current literature on religion and ecology.

Advaita's Supposed Natural Reverence

S. Cromwell Crawford, in the conclusion of his 1982 edition of *The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals*, argues that the "unitive view" of Hindu philosophy "can provide the basis for an environmental ethic." The philosophy of Brahman, he states, supplies the one essential ingredient of an environmentally sound ethic, namely, "reverence for nature." He points to the belief that *Ātman* (the true Self) is one with Brahman, the idea that all beings are separate only apparently, actually being emanations of the one Brahman. This gives Hinduism a "cosmic" outlook on life: "The nature of the self in Hinduism includes all lesser forms of existence." Indeed, the universe, though it appears to be merely material, is actually the universal consciousness itself. This doctrine, Crawford believes, "provides the philosophic basis for the Hindu's veneration of the natural world." In short, the Hindu tradition has an "ecological conscience."⁴

Crawford mentions Śaṅkara in support of the idea that the liberation experience results in a sense of increased responsibility of the world. But he does not seem to base his discussion on the Advaita tradition itself. He seems rather to be relying on a study of primary scriptures, especially the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavadgītā*, interpreted from a more general Neo-Vedāntic stance. His colleague Eliot Deutsch, known for his work on Advaita, has also written on Hindu resources for environmental ethics. While he focuses more specifically on the non-dualist Vedānta tradition, his conclusions are nevertheless similar to Crawford's.

In a 1970 paper entitled "Vedānta and Ecology," Deutsch tries to show how Advaita contributes to three notions critical to any adequate environmental ethic. The idea of *karma* he sees as the

4. S. Cromwell Crawford, *The Evolution of Hindu Ethical Ideals* (2d ed., Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1982), 149-150.

South Asian statement of the first idea, that humanity is interconnected with everything in the natural world. The second notion, that humanity shares an essential identity with all other living things, takes the idea of interconnection further. Deutsch finds support for it in the specifically Vedāntic notion of the unity of all things in Brahman. This implies "that fundamentally all life is one, that in essence everything is reality." Deutsch argues that this way of thinking "finds its natural expression in a reverence for all living things." His final point is related to this notion of reverence. A logical corollary of the Vedāntic "emanationist" theory of creation, it is the idea that everything in nature has "intrinsic spiritual worth." In this connection, Deutsch offers Vedānta as an antidote to the Western dualism that alienates us from our bodies and from nature: "This means that for Vedānta there is no sharp duality between the body and spirit of man; each, rather, contributes to the whole and may express the full integrity of the whole."⁵

A common theme in both Cromwell and Deutsch is the reverence for nature that the Brahman doctrine is supposed to encourage.⁶ In what follows, I wish to focus on this idea in particular. First, I will demonstrate the falsity of the suggestion that Advaita Vedānta finds spiritual value inherent in nature. I will then proceed to show precisely how Śaṅkara and his followers devalue the natural world and how, in the Advaitic liberation experience, the world is not revered but rather tolerated until it passes completely away.

The Denial of Intrinsic Worth

Reverence implies value in the object being revered, indeed extraordinary worth. Does Advaita lead us to see such value in nature? Does it hold that there is, in Deutsch's words, an "intrinsic spiritual worth" in everything in the natural world such that nature should be cherished and protected?

5. Elliot Deutsch, "Vedānta and Ecology," *Indian Philosophical Annual* 7 (Madras: The Center for Advanced Study in Philosophy, 1970), 81-83.

6. I do not mean to suggest that these authors are solely responsible for this view. It is common among Neo-Vedantic interpreters of Advaita. For example, in an article entitled "The Value of the World as the Mystery of God in Advaita Vedānta," Anantanand Rambachan writes: "The Advaita proposition about the essential unity of all existence in and through God . . . requires the development of a sense of identity and empathy with the natural world" (*Journal of Dharma* 14 [July-Sept. 1989]: 296). The very title of this article is indicative of the author's attempt to reconstruct the traditional Advaitic view in the light of modern concerns.

Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BU) 2.4 records a well-known dialogue between the sage Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī. As Yājñavalkya is married, indeed to two wives, and shows considerable affection toward Maitreyī, we might hope for some sense of relatedness to things of the earth and nature. The sage, however, is leaving the world, and his wives, for a higher state, that of the ascetic renouncer. Asked by his wife for a final word of wisdom before he departs, Yājñavalkya is genuinely touched: "You have truly been dear to me; now you have increased your dearness." But his heart is truly elsewhere, and in a well-known passage he proceeds to undercut this tender valuation:

Lo, verily, not for the sake of the husband is the husband dear, but for the sake of the Self (*ātman*) is the husband dear. Lo, verily, not for the sake of the wife is the wife dear, but for the sake of the Self is the wife dear.

He continues with the same formula, including sons, cattle, wealth, caste status, and even the Vedas. His analysis broadens to include the most general: the gods, the beings, the worlds. "Lo, verily," he finally declares, "not for the sake of all is all dear, but for the sake of the Self is all dear."

Now, we might read this as a statement that the husband, wife, and so on have value as expressions of the Self.⁷ But this is not what Yājñavalkya is saying. He is expressing the renouncer's devaluation of phenomena in favor of the supreme value of the Absolute. "With the intention of teaching non-attachment, the means to immortality," Śaṅkara explains, "Yājñavalkya creates a distaste for the wife, husband, sons, and so on, so they may be renounced."⁸ Reverence for the things of life and nature, according to this view, is misdirected reverence for the Self. It should be redirected toward the Self. Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyī "it is the Self (not the husband) that should be seen, heard, reflected upon, meditated upon." *BU* 1.4.8 declares, "One should meditate on the Self alone as dear." Expanding this notion, Vidyāraṇya tells us that, since the Self is the highest object of love, one should become indifferent to all objects of experience and transfer one's love to the Self. Objects of experience exist only for the sake of the experiencer, the Self.⁹

7. This is how my students in Southern California prefer to read it: "He sees his wife as an expression of God."

8. *BUBh* 2.4.5.

9. *PD* 12.32; 7. 202, 206.

In this way of thinking, value is located in the Self alone. Far from being worthy of reverence, all that is other than the Ātman, including nature, is without value. Thus Sureśvara: "This supreme (Brahman-Ātman) is said to be the savor (*rasa*) of this (world of) effects which itself is devoid of savor."¹⁰

Fear of Nature, Change, and Multiplicity

Advaita Vedānta embraces the negative evaluation of life in the natural world common among India's spiritual traditions. Speaking of the worldview of South Asian asceticism, Eliade points out that "when the sense of the religiousness of the cosmos has become lost . . . cyclic time becomes terrifying."¹¹ Advaita is a prominent example of this outlook. Far from encouraging reverence for nature, it inculcates fear of it. It is no accident that the practicing Advaitin is required by the tradition to be a celibate world-renouncer.¹² Śaṅkara and his disciples see the universe of birth and rebirth (*samsāra*) as a "terrible ocean" infested with sea-monsters. In it we are drowning, and from it we need rescue.¹³ Individual selves trapped in *samsāra* go from birth to birth without attaining peace. They are like worms, caught in a river, being swept along from one whirlpool to another.¹⁴ The sole purpose of the Advaitic *guru* is to overcome the monster of ignorance, together with its manifestation, the world.¹⁵ What should our attitude to participation in life be? Śaṅkara answers: "One should despise, fear, have disgust for existence in *samsāra*, thinking 'Let there be no falling (again) into this terrible, vast ocean of *samsāra*.'"¹⁶ Śaṅkara stipulates that, before beginning study of the Vedānta, a student must have intense yearning for liberation from this world (*mumukṣutva*).¹⁷ In this state, the student cries, "When and how, O Lord, shall I be released from the bondage of *samsāra*."¹⁸

10. *TUBhV* 2.421 (on *TU* 2.7.1).

11. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 107.

12. See Nelson, "Theism for the Masses."

13. *MKBh* 4, colophon.

14. *PD* 1.30.

15. *PD* 1.1.

16. *ChUBh* 5.10.8.

17. *BSBh* 1.1.1.

18. *AA* 9. Mahāyāna Buddhism begins with this awareness of the painfulness and profound insufficiency of time and nature. In the end, however, it reverses this evaluation with a radical reclamation of and commitment to the world, as expressed in the ideal of the *bodhisattva*. See below.

When we find mention of non-human species in Advaita literature, they are not valued as fellow embodiments of spirit, as Cromwell suggests. Instead, they are held before us as symbols of the sufferings experienced in *saṃsāra*. The universe is not a community, but a hierarchy, in which gods enjoy great happiness, human beings experience moderate happiness and pain, and animals suffer "extreme misery".¹⁹ As the result of evil karma, souls are born as plants, which endure suffering when they are harvested, cooked, and eaten.²⁰ Trees and other plants, we are told, serve as bodies in which the results of sins may be experienced through reincarnation.²¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad (ChU)* 5.10.7-8 promises birth as a dog or a pig to those whose conduct has been evil. Those who neglect both spiritual knowledge and ritual works will be, the text tells us, reborn again and again in despicable births as "small creatures." Śaṅkara comments:

They take birth as these small creatures – gadflies, mosquitoes and other insects – which are reborn again and again. . . . Their continuity in a succession of births and deaths is . . . said to be caused by the Lord. They spend their time in mere birth and death, having opportunity for neither ritual nor enjoyment.

Such tiny creatures pass their lives in experiencing pain. They are "driven into terrible darkness from which it is difficult to escape, as if into a bottomless sea without any raft, without hope of crossing it."²²

Distilled philosophically, the Advaitin's fear of the world leads to a radical antipathy to change and multiplicity. The Advaitin yearns for the unchanging, the radically unitary. He²³ defines the real as that which is absolutely without variation (*kūṭastha-nitya, nityaḥ avikriyaḥ*).²⁴ It is pure, immutable consciousness, transcendent to the notoriously

19. *BSBh* 2.1.34.

20. *BSBh* 3.1.24.

21. *VedP* 7.

22. *ChUBh* 5.10.8.

23. Since Śaṅkara requires that the practicing Advaitin be a male Brahmin *saṃnyāsīn*, I deliberately avoid using gender inclusive language when speaking of him. See Lance Nelson, "Theism for the Masses, Non-dualism for the Monastic Elite: A Fresh Look at Śaṅkara's Trans-theistic Spirituality," in *The Struggle over the Past: Fundamentalism in the Modern World*, ed. William Shea (College Theology Society Papers, 1989), forthcoming.

24. *BSBh* 1.1.4, 2.1.14; *BhGBh* 2.16-18.

mutable world of nature. In precise contradistinction to the rich diversity of the natural universe, it is absolutely one, devoid of all multiplicity. The Upaniṣad declares of Brahman:

Here there is no plurality (*nānātva*) whatsoever. One goes from death to death who sees here plurality, as it were.²⁵

Śaṅkara tells us, "Oneness (*ekatva*) alone is the single highest truth." Multiplicity arises as a product of false perception (*mithyā-jñāna*).²⁶

The Objectification and Devaluation of Nature

In Advaita metaphysics, the world of nature – the suspect world of change and multiplicity – undergoes a wholesale objectification and radical ontological devaluation. This process includes, of course, the human body and mind. Advaita, betraying its legacy from the archaic Sāṃkhya dualism, bases itself on a noetic discrimination (*viveka*) between Self and non-Self (*anātman*), a sorting out process that is at least provisionally dualistic. Śaṅkara posits the capacity of "discrimination between the Eternal and the non-eternal" (*nityānitya-vastu-viveka*) as an essential preliminary to the study of Vedānta.²⁷ The idea is restated in the title of a work attributed to Śaṅkara, the *Dr̥gdṛśyaviveka*, "The Discrimination between the Seer (*dr̥k*) and the seen (*dr̥śya*)."²⁸ This is not, to be sure, the familiar Western dualism of mind and body. We must discriminate instead between spirit and matter, the pure subject and its objects. Mind – along with emotion, memory, and all that constitutes personality – is regarded as a subtle form of matter. It must be rejected, together with body and nature, in favor of the pure awareness of the Self.

It is pointless, therefore, and utterly misleading to say that Advaita overcomes the Western duality of mind and body. If anything, the Advaitin is less comfortable in his body than the Westerner. The body, taken as a symbol of change, decay, and the bondage of spirit, is objectified as an object of mistrust. The *Aparokṣānubhūti* repeats, in no less than five successive verses, the refrain: "I am not the body, whose nature is unreal (*asadrūpa*). The wise call this true knowledge."²⁸ The goal of the Advaita discipline is to realize that the Self is in

25. BU 4.4.19.

26. BSBh 2.1.14.

27. BSBh 1.1.1.

28. AA 24–28.

fact other than matter, other than the body and that its embodiedness is only apparent. The truth to be realized is that the Self is eternally liberated, eternally disembodied (*aśarīra*).

But, we might ask, can we speak of "matter" in a system in which all is Brahman? The answer, surprising as it might seem, must be "Yes." For along with the idea of objectivity (*dṛśyatva*) comes the notion of insentience (*jaḍatva*). All that is other than Self is insentient, unconscious (*jaḍa*, *ajñāna*). Under BS 2.1.4-6 Śāṅkara argues against the Sāṅkhya that it is possible for Brahman, which is conscious, to be the cause of the world, which is unconscious. That the cause is conscious does not entail that the world must also be. Although insofar as it exists it does share in Brahman's existence (*sattā*), the world itself, as phenomenal, is in fact unconscious (*acetana*) and impure (*aśuddha*). Padmapāda, a disciple of Śāṅkara, tells us that ignorance, the source of the world-appearance, is an insentient power (*jaḍātmiḥ avidyā-śakti*).²⁹ Since *māyā* (the creative power of Brahman) and all its products, including mind, are insentient, the universe as universe is unconscious, inert - as emphatically as in the dualistic Sāṅkhya. To say, as Crawford does, that the natural world is the supreme Consciousness itself is thus, in the context of Advaita, out of the question.

The goal of the Advaitin is in fact to attain a state of utter independence (*nirālambatā*) in which spirit is no longer reliant on, or limited by, the body, the mind, or the world of nature.³⁰ Having objectified nature and reduced it to insentience, the ascetic takes the next step: he turns his attention away from it. To help him overcome his natural human identification with, and attachment to, his false phenomenal supports, the ascetic must practice "seeing the defects" in them (*doṣa-darśana*). The body, he must convince himself, is inert (*jaḍa*) and "besmeared with endless impurities."³¹ Indeed he must cultivate positive disgust for it and all other phenomena. Thus we read:

The defects of the body, mind, and objects of experience are innumerable. The discriminating have no more liking for them than for milk-porridge vomited by a dog.³²

29. Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; 1975), 2:105; Sri Swami Satchidanandendra, *The Method of the Vedanta* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 388.

30. AA 123.

31. AA 36-37.

32. PD 14. 25.

This distaste should extend to include the entire creation. The Advaitin contemplates it as false (*māyika*), transient (*āgamāpāyin*), insignificant (*tuccha*), painful (*duḥkha-rūpa*), and to be abandoned (*heya*).³³ Ultimately the ascetic must aim at a total "renunciation of the universe" (*tyāgo prapañca-rūpasya*).³⁴

Nonduality Through Denial

The truth is that Advaita Vedānta is not non-dualistic in the sense of providing a vision that accepts the world as a facet of the real. A preliminary denial of the world as apprehended by egoic consciousness must, of course, be allowed for in any religious system. This accomplished, the Upaniṣadic dictum "All this, verily, is Brahman" (*ChU* 3. 14. 1) would seem to lead to a final reclamation of the world, in the vision of the sage, as Absolute. This in fact is what occurs in Tantric non-dualism, Mahāyāna Buddhism (especially in East Asia), and the teaching of Sri Aurobindo. The mixture of Tantric elements in late Advaita, the Tantric Advaita of Ramakrishna, and the Neo-Vedānta of Vivekananda and others³⁵ has created the impression that a similar revalorization of the universe occurs in "orthodox" Advaita. It does not. The strict Advaita tradition never recovers the world as equivalent to the Absolute, as does Mahāyāna Buddhism with its radical equation of *samsāra* and *Nirvāna*. The Advaitin never reverses his flight from the terrors of time and nature, as do the *bodhisattvas* of the Mahāyāna, who commit themselves to remaining in the rounds of *samsāra* for eternity. We never find in Advaita a vision of the world as the moving expansion of the Divinity, as is found in Ramakrishna's non-dualism. "O Mother," sings this Tantric visionary, "Thou art verily Brahman and Thou art verily śakti. . . . Thou art the Absolute and Thou dost manifest Thyself as the Relative."³⁶ Ramakrishna compares the *jñānin* (knower) lost in the unity of the attributeless Brahman to a person who has climbed to the roof of a house and forgotten the steps altogether. This, however, is not the most complete realization:

33. *Tīkā* on *Śrībhagavadbhaktirasāyana* 1.32.

34. AA 106.

35. Neo-Vedānta adds to the mix, juxtaposed (paradoxically?) with the Tantric element, ethical concerns derived from the West.

36. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (abridged ed.; New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1974), 178.

The *vijnāni*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as Brahman . . . is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings.³⁷

Ramakrishna explains that it is this realization that allows for *bhakti*, ecstatic devotion to God, even after Brahman-knowledge, a possibility that Śāṅkara denies.³⁸

Advaita cannot, of course, deny the revelation that world and Brahman are identical. The Upaniṣads are emphatic on this, in more places than one.³⁹ But Advaita's fear of change and multiplicity prevents it from seeing the potential of these passages for sacralizing the cosmos. In Śāṅkara's interpretation of *ChU* 3.14.1, the world is Brahman only because it originates from Brahman (*brahma kāraṇam*). This must be understood in light of Śāṅkara's *vivarta-vāda*, which states that the world is not a transformation of the ultimate, but an appearance (*vivarta*). It is an appearance in (*not of*) Brahman, falsely superimposed on Brahman, which serves as its ground (*adhiṣṭhāna, ālambana*).⁴⁰ To the extent that the world is the ground, it is real. Insofar as it is what it appears to be— manifold, changing—it is false (*mithyā*). All that is made of clay, is, as clay, identical with its cause. But only the clay is real (*mṛtikety eva satyam, ChU* 6.1.4).⁴¹

The ontological status of the appearance is dubious, inexplicable, as disclosed in the formula "indescribable as being either real or unreal" (*sad-asadbhyām anirvacaniya*). Says Vidyāraṇya:

The pot is not different from the clay, since it does not exist apart from the clay; but neither is it identical with the clay, as in the original unmolded clay it is not perceived. Therefore it is indescribable.⁴²

37. *Ibid.*, 155.

38. See *BhGBh* 12.12 and Nelson, "Theism for the Masses."

39. In addition to *ChU* 3.4.1, see, e.g., *BU* 2.4.6, "These worlds, these gods, these beings, and this all are this Self"; *Mu* 2.2.11, "This universe is but Brahman alone"; *ChU* 7.25.2, "All this is but the Self alone."

40. "By [Brahman's] being the material cause is meant its being the substratum of the superimposition of the universe," *VedP* 7.

41. *BSBh* 2.1.14.

42. *PD* 13.35-36.

From this we can see that Advaita never escapes from its dualistic Sāṃkhya heritage. It cannot accept the world as identical with Brahman, for that would admit change into spirit. It therefore, like Sāṃkhya, wants to keep the world outside the Absolute. But how can it do that without contradicting the Upaniṣadic dictum "one only, without second" (*ChU* 6. 2. 1)? The world must be left hanging, neither real nor unreal, neither different from nor identical with the Absolute. This, at least, is the preliminary (*vyāvahārika*) point of view. The final (*pāramārthika*) position preserves non-duality by asserting that the world simply is not there. "Apart from the real" (*sato vivecita*), Vidyāraṇya tells us, the elements either, air, fire, water, earth – and indeed the whole cosmos (*brahmāṇḍa*) – are false (*mithyā*), non-existent (*asat*) appearances.⁴³

The logic of Advaita tends not toward the re-evaluation of nature as divine, but toward its denial. "The unreal portion (*anṛtāmśa*)," Vidyāraṇya teaches, "need not be known, for knowledge of it is useless (*anupayoga*)." All elements of experience other than pure knowledge (*bodhamātra*) must be eliminated to arrive at Brahman, which is pure knowledge.⁴⁴ The *Aparokṣānubhūti* agrees: "One should see the cause [Brahman] in the effect (the world) and then reject the effect completely."⁴⁵

This mode of thinking finds its logical culmination in the idea that the world simply does not exist. Indeed, the earliest recorded formulation of Advaita is Gaudapāda's doctrine of non-origination (*ajāti*). The world of nature and all its creatures may appear before the deluded mind, but in truth they are not there. Despite appearances, the idea than any being ever comes into existence is false.⁴⁶ Thus Sureśvara:

(Creation) is not now, because the Self is always non-dual and absolutely unchanging. So in reality it never was, nor is, nor will it come to be.⁴⁷

Elsewhere, the same author tells us that, for those who have seen the real, the idea of the origination, persistence, and eventual dissolution of the universe is impossible.⁴⁸

43. *PD* 2. 90-97.

44. *PD* 13.56; 3.21.

45. *AA* 139, p. 74.

46. *MK* 4.4-5, 19, 31, 71; see also 2.32.

47. *TUBhV* 2.144.

48. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāṣyavārttika* 2.1.411.

The Vision of the Knower: Does the Evaluation of Nature Change with Liberation?

In a more recent piece entitled "A Metaphysical Grounding for Natural Reverence: East-West,"⁴⁹ Deutsch presents an understanding of Advaita that is more authentic. He allows that Advaita does in fact present a "radical discontinuity between reality and nature" in which the latter is utterly devalued. Despite this fact, he still argues that Advaita provides the "surest foundation" for natural reverence. How is this possible? Advaita's devaluation of nature has, according to Deutsch's analysis, an unexpected result. In the *mokṣa* (liberation) experience it leads to profound detachment and hence true freedom, without which reverence is not really possible. "Paradoxically," he writes, "when nature is seen to be valueless in the most radical way, it can then be made valuable *with us* in creative play." Spiritual freedom enables us to approach nature with an authentic concern that is liberated from the desires of the ego and hence more truly aware of nature's real needs. If one can understand spirit, nature, and their relationship in the Advaitic way, thus attaining freedom and detachment, the world becomes "value-laden" and "a natural reverence then becomes one's basic attitude with nature."⁵⁰

To evaluate this argument, we must look at what Advaita says about the experience of the liberated saint. The situation in which one realizes true freedom in this world, as described by Deutsch, Advaita calls *jivanmukti* or "living" *mukti* (i. e., "living liberation"). If we look for indications of exactly how the liberated sage, the *mukta*, experiences the world, we find, in fact, no evidence of reverence for nature and no grounds for supposing it.

Where Śaṅkara does grant continued empirical experience for the *mukta*, it is under the analogy of a person with an eye defect. Persons with double vision, he suggests, may continue to see two moons even though they know better.⁵¹ Knowledge of the true situation does not cause the second moon to disappear; the false appearance remains. Nevertheless, they know it to be an illusion. Maṇḍana uses this analogy—

49. Eliot Deutsch, "A Metaphysical Grounding for Natural Reverence: East-West," in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, ed. by J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 259-265.

50. *Ibid.*, 265.

51. *BSBh* 4.1.18.

which shows it was current before Śaṅkara – and so does Śaṅkara’s direct disciple, Padmapāda.⁵² It is common in the later literature.

The use of this “two-moon” analogy to explain the experience of the *mukta* shows that in Advaita there is no such thing as what has been called nondual perception, i.e., immediate awareness of phenomena as not different from the absolute.⁵³ Phenomena may continue in the state of living liberation. But insofar as they do, they are experienced as false perceptions, irritating intrusions of a remote, inexplicable, empirical other into the self-luminous fullness of the Self.

Vācaspati confirms this suspicion. He also uses a disease model to explain the experience of the *jīvanmukta*. Although knowers of Brahman may continue to engage in empirical activity, he tells us, they do not believe in its reality.

For example, even though knowing for certain that sugar is sweet, persons afflicted by a disorder of the bile continue to experience a bitter taste. [We know this] because having tasted [sugar], they spit it out, and then discard it.⁵⁴

Again, the Advaitin compares the *mukta*’s empirical experience to a perception known to be false, but introduced regrettably by an illness.

Elsewhere we find other equally instructive metaphors indicating the value the liberated nondualist places on his experience of natural phenomena. In his *Brahmasiddhi*,⁵⁵ Maṇḍana speaks of the *jīvanmukta* as one who experiences his body as a mere shadow (*chāyā-mātra*). Describing his experience of living liberation, Sarvajñātman declares, “I see my body as the cast-off skin of a snake . . . and the universe as if it were a burnt rope.”⁵⁶ Other Advaitins say the world appears to them like a burnt cloth. Though it may retain its shape, it is ineffectual.⁵⁷ According to Vidyāranya the world of duality, if it remains in liberation, is like a dead rat or a corpse, i.e., a repulsive object that we would naturally seek to avoid. It is an edgeless weapon, once dangerous but now no

52. *Brahmasiddhi* 1; *Pañcapādikā* 9.

53. See David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), chap. 2.

54. *Bhāmatī* 1.1.1.

55. *Brahmasiddhi* 3.

56. *Saṅkṣepasātrīka* 4.54–55. Cf. *BU* 4.4.7.

57. *Siddhāntaleśasamgraha* 4.

longer able to harm. Even *Brahma-loka*, the highest heavenly world, is seen to be "like straw."⁵⁸

The theme of perceiving the world as unreal appearance is common in later texts. The *Pañcadaśī* teaches that knowledge makes one conscious of the world's illusory nature (*māyātva, mṛṣātmatā*). The liberated ascetic is conscious of the world's falsity (*jagan-mithyātva-dhi*). For him, the whole appearance is insignificant, negligible (*tuccha*).⁵⁹ The *Pañcikaraṇavārttika*, though initially stating that the *jīvanmukta* "does not see this world" (*jagad etan na viśyate*), nevertheless concedes that in practical life it is sometime experienced. But the liberated sage perceives the world as false (*mithyā*), like mistaken directions or a divided moon, and the body as an illusion (*pratibhāsa*). The continuity of his *karma* is a "mere appearance" (*ābhāsa-mātra*).⁶⁰ The *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* describes the *jīvanmukta* as "beholding this world as one seen in dreams."⁶¹

These are hardly terms of reverence. If not intended to generate positive disgust, they certainly continue the ascetic devaluation of nature, even in the liberated state. At best, the world for the *jīvanmukta* is ontologically hollow, exhausted, a mere husk or shadow. The goal is ultimately to go beyond empirical experience altogether.

The Dissolution of the World

The comparison of the world to a dream is in fact quite common in Advaita. It is also described as a magic show or an imaginary city in the sky (*gandharva-nagara*).⁶² The intended point is that, when Brahman is known, the sleeper awakes and the dream disappears, the illusion dissolves. The *mukta* arrives at a state in which there is no experience of the world at all. Thus Yājñavalkya:

But when to the knower of Brahman everything has become the Self, then what should one see and through what, what should one smell and through what, what should one taste and through what, . . . , what should one hear and through what, . . . , what should one touch and through what?⁶³

58. PD 7.279–281, 6.285.

59. PD 4.40; 6.12–14, 129–130; 7.136.

60. *Pañcikaraṇavārttika* 56–59.

61. *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 425.

62. PD 2.68; MK 2.31. See also MK 2.15; PD 6. 210–11, 18; 7.172, 176; 13.86, 95, 98; AA 56, 62.

63. BU 4.5.15.

"Knowledge," Śaṅkara tells us, "arises of itself and cancels ignorance, and on account of that, this entire world of names and forms together with its inhabitants, which had been superimposed by ignorance, vanishes away like the world of a dream."⁶⁴ Again: "In the supreme state (*paramārtha-avasthā*), all empirical experience is absent (*sarva-vyavahāra-abhāva*)."⁶⁵ Elsewhere he asserts that knowledge of Brahman dissolves the material elements "like rivers in the ocean," "like foam and bubbles upon water." At this point, he declares, "pure knowledge—infinite—supreme, pellucid—alone remains."⁶⁶

Instructive in this connection is a portion of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī's commentary on *Bhagavadgītā* 3.18. The great Advaitin scholastic describes with approval a scheme from the *Yogavāsīṣṭha* that admits three degrees in the attainment of *jīvanmukti*. In the first level, the *yogin* is able to enter into a state of unconditioned absorption in the Self (*nirvikalpa-samādhi*). In this state, he can return to normal consciousness at will. He is called an "excellent knower of Brahman" (*brahma-vid-vara*). With practice, he may attain a deeper absorption from which he cannot stir himself but must be roused by others. Such an adept is known as the "more excellent knower of Brahman." Then there comes a state in which the practitioner is so deeply absorbed that he can neither rouse himself nor be roused by others. He has no cognition of difference whatsoever (*sarvathā bheda-darśanābhāva*). Rather, he is constantly and completely identified with the Self (*sarvadā tan-maya*). In this condition, he makes no effort for self-preservation. God himself maintains his life and breath, and others take care of his bodily needs. Abiding always in a state of unalloyed supreme bliss, he is known as a "most excellent knower of Brahman."⁶⁷ Thus, the highest attainment is one in which the saint is totally cut off from empirical experience. Only when he has no awareness of the world at all does he rise above the perception of difference.⁶⁸

64. *BSBh* 3.2.21.

65. *BSBh* 2.1.14.

66. *BUBh* 2.4.12.

67. *Gāḍhārthadīpikā* on *BhG* 3.18. This scheme is also given in *Jīvanmuktiviveka* 4 (S. Subrahmanya Sastri and T.R. Srinivasa Ayyangar, eds., *Jīvanmuktiviveka of Vidyāraṇya* [Adyar, Madras: The Adyar Library and Research Center, 1978], 135–137).

68. From the *pāramārthika* perspective, of course, even the continuance of his body is in the experience of others only. The sage has realized the non-existence of both body and world.

The idea of *jivanmukti*, that the sage can be liberated and continue living in the world, is in fact controversial, even within the Śāṅkara tradition itself. The problem, in brief, is that empirical experience is held to be a product of ignorance, while the knowledge that grants freedom is said to destroy ignorance completely and immediately. The fear, therefore, is that continued empirical experience of any kind for the *mukta* implies the continuation of ignorance, which the Brahman-knowledge that lead to liberation was supposed to have destroyed. For this reason some Advaitins, such as Prakāśānanda, believe living liberation to be impossible. They teach that the rise of knowledge results in immediate and literal disembodiment (*videhamukti*). Most others, including Śāṅkara,⁶⁹ believe that a continuing impression (*samskāra*) or remnant (*leśā*) of ignorance persists to account for the continued empirical experience of the *mukta*.⁷⁰ Śāṅkara and those who follow him do not think that this lingering impression is an obstacle to full *mukti*,⁷¹ but some do. For example, Prakāśātman regards such a remnant as an obstacle (*pratibandhaka*) to complete liberation. He laments that it causes the knower to slip periodically into dualistic awareness (*dvaita-darśana*).⁷² Thus he and others, such as Vimuktātman and Dharmarāja, tend toward the belief that true and complete liberation only occurs at death.

Despite their differences, all of these writers share the assumption that *any* experience of the world and nature is somehow, whether through impression or remnant, based on ignorance. Despite Śāṅkara's insistence that embodied liberation is true and complete, the implication is that the ideal state is one in which there is no empirical experience, of nature or anything else. Thus the common use of the term *kaivalya* (isolation) – a term borrowed from the dualistic Sāṃkhya-Yoga – to describe the final goal. In *kaivalya* the liberated consciousness attains complete disjunction from the world: mind, body, and nature. This is

69. *BSBh* 4.1.15.

70. For example, Maṇḍana, Vācaspati, Prakāśātman, Vimuktātman, Sarvajñātman, Madhusūdana. The views of all but Madhusūdana are presented by Setchidanandendra.

71. *BSBh* 1.1.4, 3.4.52.

72. *The Pañcapādikā of Śrī Padmapādācārya with the Pañcapādikāvivarṇa of Śrī Prakāśātman*, edited by S. Śrīrāma Śāstri and S. R. Krishnamurthi Śāstri, Madras Government Oriental Series, No. 155 (Madras: Government Oriental Manuscripts Library, 1958), 786.

the Advaitin's true aim. The Śāṅkara saṁnyāsin yearns to be disembodied (*videha*). The intense detachment generated by Brahman knowledge allows for a figurative disembodiment in life, even while the body lingers under the influence of its karmic momentum.⁷³ But the fact that this continued bodily awareness must be supported by a lingering trace of ignorance points to a higher goal. Literal disembodiment at death is the preferred state.⁷⁴ The liberated sage whose *karma* causes him to undergo further empirical experience suffers, Vidyāraṇya tells us, like one undergoing forced labor (*viṣṭi-grhita-vat*).⁷⁵

Conclusion

It is hard to avoid the judgment that Advaita leads to acosmism. That is to say, it achieves its nonduality not inclusively but exclusively: the world of nature is finally cast out of the Absolute, cast out of existence. We find the same world-alienation here that we find in the Jaina, Sāṁkhya-Yoga, and early Buddhist traditions. We might well ask whether Ludwig Feuerbach's epitome of Christian world-denial applies equally to the Advaitin ascetic:

In the inmost depths of thy soul, thou wouldst rather there be no world, for where the world is, there is matter, and where there is matter there is weight and resistance, space and time, limitation and necessity.⁷⁶

No doubt the Advaitin would resist such a characterization. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is useful to reflect on the extent to which it is applicable. After all, Śāṅkara's position is emphatically world denying and, I believe, ultimately monistic. From the absolute (*pāramārthika*) perspective, the world is simply not there. Advaita's non-duality is, in fact, only provisional. From the empirical (*vyāvahārika*) perspective the world is admitted as an inexplicable appearance, neither real nor unreal, neither different from nor identical with Brahman. But

73. *BSBh* 1.1.4, 1.3.19 *BUBh* 4.4.7.

74. Free in life, the *jīvanmukta* still looks toward the final freedom that occurs at death: "being liberated, he is [further] liberated (*vimuktaś ca vimucyate*," *Katha* 2.2.1); "I shall remain only so long as I have not been released; then I shall attain" (*CU* 3.14.2). According to *Jīvanmuktiviveka* 3 (p. 129, quoting the *Laghuyogavāsiṣṭha* 28.27), disembodied liberation (*videhamukti*) is "the state most pure, free from corruption." In it "even the luminous, creative aspect of matter (*satva*), the support of the highest virtue, is dissolved."

75. *PD* 7. 143.

76. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (Harper & Row, New York, 1957), 110.

this is not a world affirming doctrine. Again, Feuerbach's words seem relevant:

Nevertheless, there *is* a world and there *is* matter. How dost thou escape from the dilemma of this contradiction? How dost thou expel the world from thy consciousness, that it may not disturb thee in the beatitude of thy unlimited soul? Only . . . by giving it an arbitrary existence, always hovering between existence and non-existence, always awaiting its annihilation.⁷⁷

Ultimately, of course, even this arbitrary existence must be transcended. The logic of Advaita, and its longing for liberation from all form, move it inexorably in the direction of acosmic monism. Whether or not Advaita encourages the kind of worldloathing suggested by the quotation from Feuerbach is debatable. I believe that at least some strands of the tradition do. There can be no doubt, however, that the tradition as a whole fosters devaluation and disregard of the world,⁷⁸ with important consequences for India's attitudes toward nature.

Into the waters of India's sacred Mother Ganges (*gaṅgā māṭā*) millions of gallons of raw sewage, hundreds of incompletely cremated corpses, and huge amounts of chemical waste are dumped daily. The situation is critical – an ecological disaster is on the horizon.⁷⁹ Yet a Benares taxi driver can still say, "The Ganges is God and [God]

77. Ibid.

78. Note that I do not attempt to present here the interpretations of academic proponents of Advaita, Neo-Vedānta, non-dualism, or perennialism, in India or the West. They have their own varied reasons for reading cosmic inclusivity, even natural reverence, into Advaita (reasons that the *saṁnyāsin* exponents of traditional Advaita do not share). They especially will accuse me of misunderstanding the subtleties of the Advaita position. For example, it could be argued that Śaṅkara's denial of empirical experience in *mukti*, his assertion that the world vanishes "like a dream," could be explained as his way of saying that non-dual perception is so radically different from ordinary perception as to be a kind of non-perception (see David Loy, *Non-duality*, chap. 2). Whether or not this is true, and I think I have shown it is not, such hermeneutical subtlety is beside the point when we are talking of the cultural and ecological influence of Advaita. I am concerned here with the effect the Advaita tradition *as a whole* has had on the collective mind of South Asia. Also irrelevant, therefore, are any distinctions between the teachings of Śaṅkara and that of his later followers, important as such differences no doubt are in other contexts.

79. See Barnaby Conrad III, "A Daring Plan to Clean Up the Ganges," *San Francisco Examiner*, 3 July 1983, 7 (P) and Jonathan Broder, "Pollution Threatens the Ancient Purity of the Ganges," *San Francisco Examiner*, 31 March 1985, 8-9 (Travel).

can't be polluted."⁸⁰ To be sure, he is not formally an Advaitin. He nevertheless echoes, whether consciously or unconsciously, the thought of the Advaita tradition. He restates the argument of *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* and the *Bhagavadgītā* that the destruction of the natural, material component of life does not affect spirit:

It is never born, nor does it ever die. . . . It is unborn, eternal, everlasting, ancient. It is not killed when the body is killed.⁸¹

He reaffirms what he has learned through his culture from the preceptors of Advaita, namely, that only God (or Brahman) is real, that the world of nature is ultimately unimportant (*tuccha*).

The *Aparokṣānubhūti*, from which I have taken several passages in this paper, is a popular manual of Advaita attributed to Śaṅkara.⁸² It is sold in flimsy paperback for three rupees. It is not difficult to imagine what attitudes toward nature our taxi driver might learn if he chanced to read, or hear a sermon based on, verse four of this text:

Pure non-attachment is disregard for all objects – from the god Brahmā down to plants and minerals – like the indifference one has toward the excrement of a crow (*kāka-viṣṭhā*).

Would this inspire him to revere nature as spiritual life, or would it rather teach him the irrelevance of nature to spiritual life?

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	<i>Aparokṣānubhūti</i> of Śaṅkara (?)
BhG	<i>Bhagavadgītā</i>
BhGBh	<i>Bhagavadgītā</i> with Śaṅkara's <i>Bhāṣya</i>
BSBh	<i>Brahmasūtra</i> with Śaṅkara's <i>Bhāṣya</i>
BU	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>
BUBh	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i> with Śaṅkara's <i>Bhāṣya</i>
ChU	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>
ChUBh	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i> with Śaṅkara's <i>Bhāṣya</i>
MK	<i>Māṇḍūkya-kārikā</i> of Gaudapāda
MKBh	<i>Māṇḍūkya-kārikā</i> with Śaṅkara's <i>Bhāṣya</i>
PD	<i>Pañcadaśī</i> of Vidyāraṇya
TUBhV	<i>Taittirīyopaniṣadbhāṣyavārttika</i> of Sureśvara
VedP	<i>Vedāntaparibhāṣā</i> of Dharmarāja

80. Conrad.

81. BhG 2. 21, see *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.19.

82. This attribution has been shown by scholars to be mistaken, but we are concerned here with the popular understanding.